

BOOK REVIEWS

WALKER, ANTHONY R.. *Śakyamuni and G'uisha: Buddhism in the Lahu and Wa Mountains*. Studia Instituti Anthropos 54, Fribourg: Academic Press, 2014. 158 p. ISBN: 978-3-7278-1739-7 (paperback).

This book is an impressive and important work by *the* major anthropological specialist on the Lahu people of Northern Southeast Asia and Southwestern China. It consists of two essays; the first appeared elsewhere previously, the second, the major part, is new. Its single focus is the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism to the Lahu and Wa uplanders of South-Central Yunnan towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the context of the Ming-to-Qing Chinese dynastic succession. Much of the material here is also present in Walker's monumental 2003 *Merit and the Millennium*, but the intention of the present work is to make the subject of this religious movement more available to non-specialists. The second essay includes a remarkable wealth of technical notes largely based on Chinese language scholarship.

It is perhaps surprising to scholars of the region and of these peoples that Mahayana, the Northern Buddhism of East and Central Asia, had a significant presence there. One is used to seeing the highlanders here as clients of the Tai (Shan) principalities, which are followers of Theravada (Southern Buddhism of Mainland Southeastern Asia and Sri Lanka). Indeed, outside this restricted area, Lahu and Wa were always clients of the Shan and subject to only Theravada influences. The Wa, for instance, in Cangyuan county, to the northwest, have, at least since the late nineteenth century (see Chit Hlaing 2009), been converted to Shan-Burmese Theravada, so much so that, at least in Banhong, they often try to dissociate themselves from the Wa to the east, whom they regard as savages because of their former representation as headhunters. Among the Lahu in, for example, North West Thailand, where Walker worked for several years before coming to China, Buddhist influences (see the first essay) were clearly Shan Theravada.

Let me outline the contents of the book and eventually return to the focal theme, particularly as it is presented in the second essay. First, concerning the book's title, *Śakyamuni* is The Buddha, as the Sage of the Śakya clan to which He was born. *G'uisha* is the Lahu creator god. This pairing is appropriate because (a) *Śakyamuni* is a Sanskrit-Mahayana epithet, rarely if ever found in Theravada usage; and (b) Lahu custom is to deify references to Buddha by equating Him with *G'uisha*. As is made clear in the first essay, the Lahu here are not professing Buddhists, and the Buddhist influences with which Walker has long been concerned lie in Lahu legends and the presence of religious building complexes (in Thailand, Theravada in style), and stylistic features of Lahu 'animist' ritual constructions.

The book's first essay is entitled 'Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) Village Temples and their Buddhist Affiliations' and outlines the Buddhist background to features of indigenous Lahu religious structures in Northern Thailand and in China; it is also a history of the author's search for those influences and his discoveries in China of Mahayana influences. The second is 'Mahayana Buddhism in the Lahu and Wa Mountains of Southwestern China' and comprises a detailed study of the history and distribution of Mahayana and

its introduction in the region. This is followed by a Bibliography, a corpus of 18 Plates, an Index of Authors and Editors Cited, and a General Index and Glossary.

Page 45 to the very end of the essay consists of discussion of legends and history about Mahayana monks establishing the monastic complexes of the region and about Lahu and Wa 'conversion'. Of especial significance in this discussion is the role of Dali, the capital of the ancient Nanzhao kingdom in Southern Yunnan, as a source for all this, in contrast to the usual stance that these highlanders were subject to Shan (Tai) Theravada influences. It is shown that all this took place in the context of the Ming rebellion against the (Manchu) Qing dynasty that had replaced it. The monk Yang Deyuan, who is credited with having done much to bring Mahayana to these uplanders, seems to have been a former Ming official who came to this area to organize rebellion against the Qing; he might have been using his Mahayana Buddhist ideology for justifying or motivating political action. Walker fails to note this. One has to understand that the Dali region is the center of the Bai people (see p. 61), who comprised the Nanzhao kingdom from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. This kingdom was partly concentrated in northern mainland Southeastern Asia, especially Burma, and was in large measure Buddhist (Theravada). Thus, the Ming rebellion was based in Dali, and may amount to a situation in which there was an attempt to shift the focus of highland clientship from Tai (a people speaking a Thai-related language, called Shan in Burma) to Bai (a people speaking a Tibeto-Burman language and living in Southern Yunnan) as a means for involving the Han-Chinese more directly, the Bai having increasingly become Han-ized. This seems to have resulted, maybe even into the eighteenth century, in a shift from Theravada influence upon the Lahu and Wa in Yunnan to Mahayana influence. Yet the highlanders were rarely, if ever, subjects of Tai princes but rather clients. All this also indicates the centrality of Dali – in between the cultural domains of China (Mahayana) and South East Asia (Theravada) – and its historical role in relation to the highlanders. This is important because it suggests that Dali may historically have been a center for the network of upland-lowland dependencies (see p. 59 on the conflict between Mahayana and Theravada) and the ultimate demise of Mahayana in the uplands.

This book is of considerable importance and interest to scholars of upland tribal relations with lowland civilizations in this general region and is beautifully written.

REFERENCES

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- Walker, Anthony R.** 2003. *Merit and the Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People*. New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Company [Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology], pp. xxxii, 907.

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